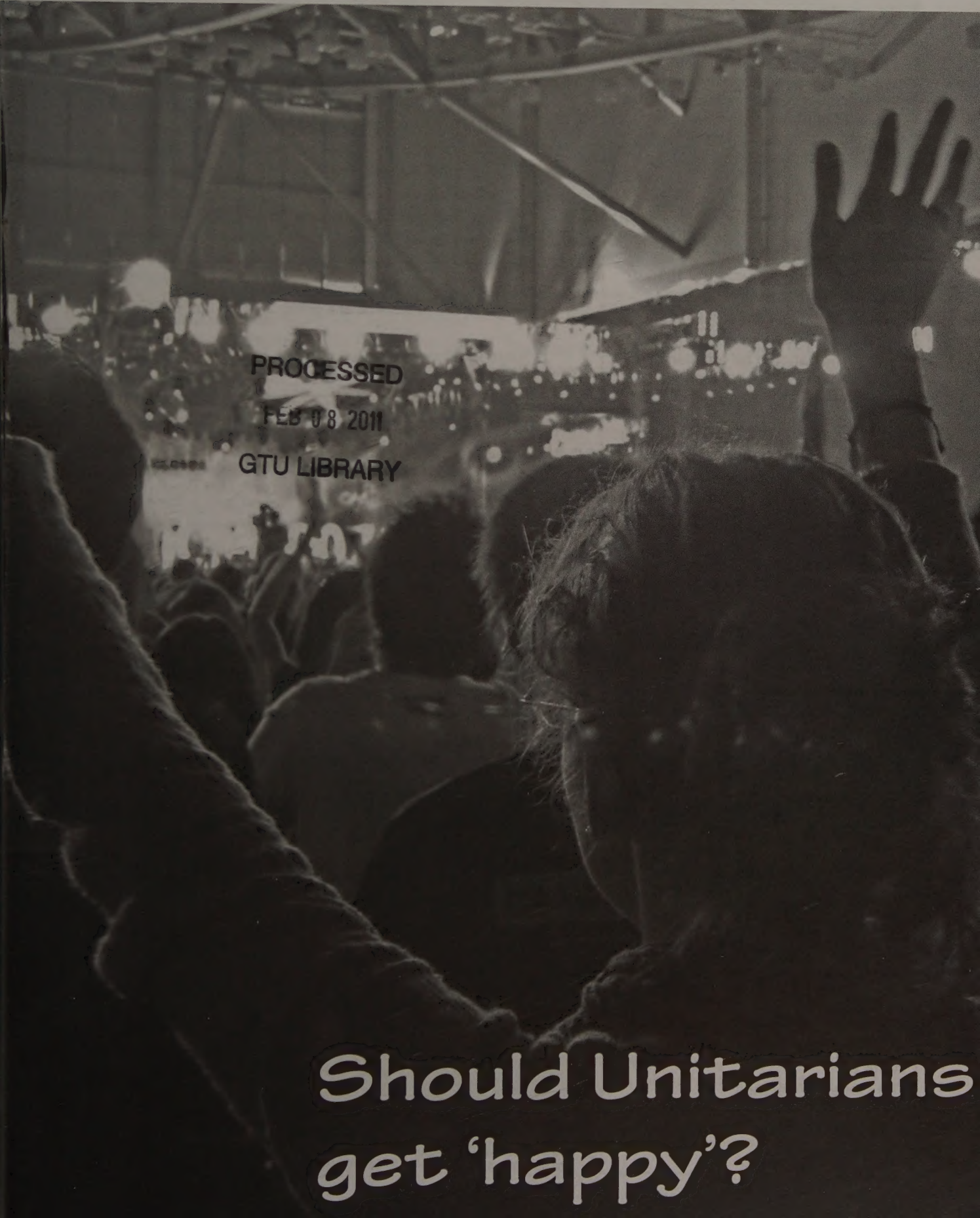


⚭ The INQUIRER

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The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7763 5 February 2011



Should Unitarians
get 'happy'?

The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

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"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

*From the Object passed at the
General Assembly of the Unitarian and
Free Christian Churches 2001*

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Cover photo Believers at a large service in France: Martin Boulanger

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Inquiring Words

In the name of Allah,
the beneficent, the merciful.
Praise be to the Lord of the
Universe who has created us and
made us into tribes and nations
That we may know each other, not that
we may despise each other.
If the enemy incline towards peace, do
thou also incline towards peace, and
trust God, for the Lord is the one that
heareth and knoweth all things.
And the servants of God,
Most gracious are those who walk on
the Earth in humility, and when we
address them, we say, 'Peace'.

Four things support the world: the learning of the wise, the justice of the great, the prayers of the good, and the valour of the brave.

— Muhammad

Sunni Muslims mark Muhammad's birthday on 15 February, Shia Muslims on 20 February

Editor's View

What would 'Surfer Jesus' do?

For a short time in high school, I hung around with a 'born-again' Christian church. I say 'hung around' because I hardly ever went into the church building. I went to the youth group. It was fantastic. A half-hour of Bible study full of promises and salvation and then – everybody into the pool!

I put up a picture of Jesus in my room which made him look like a surfer with a '70s fringe. I still have the modern-English Bible I bought myself and covered in tooled leather. (The better to protect the 'Good News' when I flung it under a poolside lounge.)

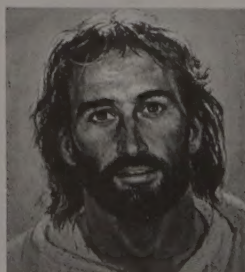
But it wasn't just the pool and the cute guys and the certainty – there was a kind of joy in that faith which enveloped me at youth group. It was all new and it nourished an emotional side of me which I had never associated with religion. Until then, faith was obligation and guilt and trying and failing.

After a while I drifted away from the poolside Bible studies. The certainty worried me. As comforting as that emotional component was, I felt there was more to faith than accepting Jesus into my heart and jumping into the pool.

Perhaps that's why I was so struck by the reflections Sue Woolley made following a recent visit to a Baptist church. It isn't just the applause, the guitars and the hymns projected on big screens. Sue found something more.

The Rev Daniel Costley (page 4) had a similar response to a service which couldn't be more different. He received the 'Eric Shirvell Price Travelling Bursary' while in his first year of study for the Unitarian ministry at Harris Manchester College, Oxford. The direction from the principal, the Rev Dr Ralph Waller, was simply to 'travel and learn'. Daniel wanted to experience the Eastern Orthodox tradition. So he travelled to Budapest and Kolozsvár (Cluj), in Hungary and Transylvania (Romania). He says, 'The sense of true, physical worship and communion with God that I found on my journey was overwhelming.'

The traditions that Daniel and Sue wrote about couldn't be more different. But might they both have something to teach us?



Surfer Jesus

— MC Burns

Should we get 'happy-clappy'?

When she attended a Baptist service, **Sue Woolley** found something she didn't expect – and plans now to incorporate it into her Unitarian services.

On a recent Sunday morning, I was not leading worship, and my local congregation did not have a service that day, so I decided to attend the local Baptist chapel, where my friend Jennie is the pastor.

The service lasted an hour-and-a-half. In structure, it was completely different to the average Unitarian service. It started with a communal reading of Psalm 24, saying in part:

The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. For he hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods. Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive the blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

The psalm was followed by the singing of three songs, led by two members of the congregation on guitars. The words were projected onto the wall of the church, via PowerPoint. The congregation sang lustily, and there were raised arms, and some called out, 'Praise Jesus'.

Following some prayers, led by Jennie, there was more singing, then some more prayers. Jennie then read from a modern translation of Chapter 10 of St Paul's Letter to the Romans, saying in part:

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes...

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!' But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?' So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ....

Jennie reflected on the reading then delivered her address, which lasted about 15 minutes. More singing followed and some members of the congregation led us in prayer.

The thing that really struck me about it was how much the congregation was involved in the service. Unlike the average Unitarian service, when the worship leader leads the worship, and congregational involvement is limited to singing four hymns (often not very well) and perhaps participation in the Lord's Prayer (which, interestingly, was not on the agenda at the Baptist chapel this particular Sunday) this congregation seemed to be emotionally and spiritually involved in the whole service, and there was much more opportunity to participate.



The General Assembly meetings offer an opportunity to sing out 'lustily with joy'. Photo by John Hewerdine

The other thing that I found so different was the joy that the congregation seemed to be feeling, that they seemed to have a personal relationship with God through Jesus, and wanted the whole world to know about it. No-one was shy about showing their feelings, which is so different to the average Unitarian congregation member.

I know that the main reason for the joyous atmosphere was their certainty of having been 'saved' by being born again into a relationship with God through the "fact" that Jesus' death on the cross somehow 'paid' for the sins of the world, which are obviously beliefs that we cannot share. And I know too that many Unitarian congregations would be deeply suspicious of a "happy-clappy" type of service. Nevertheless, I cannot help noticing that whenever we are together in large numbers, for example at the GA meetings, or at Summer School, we too can sing lustily and with joy, and be more emotionally involved in worship.

So, what can we learn from them? Shammy Webster, lay leader at Denton, posted on Facebook one recent morning, 'I love it when there are a few laughs in a service. Not only is it reassuring that the congregation are awake but it also brings home the fact that worship doesn't have to be miserable and all fire and brimstone. Worship should be joyous unless circumstances dictate a gentler approach.'

Consider that last sentence: 'Worship should be joyous unless circumstances dictate a gentler approach.' How often have you attended a 'joyous' Unitarian service? And yet, we have so much to be joyful about. Let me share some extracts from the Unitarian leaflet *A Faith Worth Thinking About*:

'We believe that everyone has the right to seek truth and meaning for themselves, and that the fundamental tools for doing this are your own life-experience, your reflection upon it, your intuitive understanding and the promptings of your own conscience.'

'We affirm that people should enjoy individual liberty and private judgement in spiritual matters; that respect for integrity is preferable to the pressure to conform; and that our beliefs may change in the light of new understanding and insight.'

'Unitarians find their bond of unity in shared values, such
(Continued on next page)

Minister finds 'true, physical' worship

By Daniel Costley

On the day before Palm Sunday, I attended the Saturday morning service at the Romanian Orthodox Cathedral on the Pieta Avram Iancu in Kolozsvár.

I got up early, expecting to have an opportunity to walk quietly around a deserted building, before the day got underway. I was a visitor – a Unitarian one at that – and considered that a gentle level of tourism might be the best start to the proceeding.

I walked up the steps of the striking 'Byzantine' cathedral and it seemed I was the only person visiting. However, on pushing open the Cathedral door I was confronted by hundreds of people milling around the jewelled, gilded and highly polished interior.

Families met and greeted each other; people crossed themselves and kissed icons. Weeping men and women lit candles in hidden alcoves. All while the doors of the iconostasis were opening and closing and the spectacle of the Eucharist was underway in the sanctuary. Everyone stood; some people faced the front, others faced elsewhere. Most were crossing themselves vigorously and repeatedly. Some bent down and appeared to be 'scooping' the ground after making the sign of the cross. This day before Palm Sunday was of clear significance; a table close to the front was loaded with loaves and, as people arrived, they added more bread to the pile. Each loaf had an unlit candle placed in its centre.

The overall effect was dazzling, bewildering, heady and – I admit – addictive. This was a spectacular event by any definition. Everyone present was swept up in a crescendo of emotion as the service progressed. Priests sang, the incense was overwhelming and there was movement everywhere. The Bible appeared and all knelt in reverence. The Gospel finished and the magic continued within the sparkling cavern. Glittering, painted frescos of Christ and saints shimmered in the candlelight. We could have been underwater, or in a star-lit sky, flying, spinning around one another. Communion arrived and was offered to the congregation. Combined bread and wine, delivered into the mouths of recipients on a spoon, reflected the theological stance on the indivisible natures of Christ. Some partook.

The service reached its zenith when the priests paraded the chalice to the congregation. We bowed. The priests returned to the sanctuary, the doors all closed, the curtain was closed and ...it was over.

Yet it was if the congregation hadn't noticed. Groups stood in the sanctuary while others arrived and left. This was a true community happening. I did stick out a little – as someone not part of the community. But I was ignored rather than made to feel either welcome or unwelcome. I suspect my increasing ability to know when, and how, to cross myself, to kneel, and to bow will have helped this acceptance.

I felt exhausted and privileged to have shared a personal, communal time with the Romanian people. I staggered out of the building and down the steps in need of reconnection with the unwritten Unitarian communion of coffee and cake. As I sat in a café collecting my thoughts I realised my clothes and skin smelled strongly of incense; I was a marked man.

The passion and emotion of the service were completely alien to me. This was something I had not witnessed before – certainly not in a Unitarian church. Clearly, the theological stand-



Daniel Costley in the pulpit at the Unitarian Church in Torockószentgyörgy. Photo by the Rev Zsolt Solymosi

points of our two movements are very different (and there was an element of the magical that I was not comfortable with). And the regrettable hostility I found in some Orthodox groups elsewhere in Romania later in my trip was upsetting. But the sense of true, physical worship and communion with God that I found on my journey was overwhelming.

The delight of Unitarianism is our ability and willingness to explore, borrow and respect elements of other religious traditions. The unforgettable sense of joy and fulfilment I discovered in this religious community – at an otherwise ungodly hour of the morning – was inspiring and affirming. Long may we be open to new ideas.

The Rev Daniel Costley completed his training for the ministry at Harris Manchester College in June 2010. He began his ministry with Sevenoaks Unitarians at Bessels Green in autumn.

Learning from Baptists

(Continued from previous page)

as ... mutual respect and good will in personal relations; constructive tolerance and openness towards the sincerely-held beliefs of others; peace, compassion, justice and democracy in human affairs.'

We should be shouting this message from the rooftops, proclaiming the good news that here is somewhere that you can bring your whole self, doubts, uncertainties and all, and be cherished as a member of a like-minded community.

The new hymnbook *Sing Your Faith* has some brilliant songs in it. I'm going to try to use it more often, and to make opportunities in my services for congregational participation, for example by the use of responsive prayers. And I'm going to preach that the Unitarian message is one of joy and hope – and that can lead to spiritual rebirth as part of a loving, living community.

I wonder how they'll take it?

Sue Woolley is a ministry student and member of Northampton Unitarians.

Cairo Street creates 'Room at the Inn'

By Lynne Readett

In the gospel of James Chapter 2 we hear that "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." The reasoning behind the gospel is clear, that if we as a worshipping people sit by and see people in difficulties and do nothing, then our faith is an empty shell, it becomes dead and is no faith at all.

The congregation at Cairo Street Chapel in Warrington became aware of the problem of rough sleeping in the town when one of our members, Ray Beecham, who tends the garden in the grounds of the chapel, discovered that young men were taking their rest in our burial grounds. He talked with the men and sometimes would share his lunchtime sandwiches with them. He told them of the work of the prison reformer, John Howard, who was a worshipper at the chapel, and Ray remarked that "they just wanted to be treated like normal people."

The concerns of the congregation at Cairo Street led me to contact the Rev Stephen Kingsnorth from the town centre clergy group. He was well aware of the problems which had been exacerbated by the closure of the Night Shelter due to structural problems. He informed me that no plans were in hand to make alternative accommodation arrangements.

It fell to the faith groups and the volunteer sector in Warrington to take action on this most difficult of situations. Money from many different groups, plus a substantial donation from Cairo Street Chapel enabled this project to come to fruition. But the determination shown by the people involved and their steadfast resolve not to allow vulnerable people to spend the harsh winter weather outside without shelter from the cold nights is what made it happen.

I asked Sue Blyth from the YMCA to comment on her work, as she has had the most 'hands on' experience. I asked from her point of view why this had come about and the answer was manifold but essentially it was to raise awareness of the homeless in Warrington to give them visibility and a voice, to give an accurate figure of how many were homeless in Warrington, as the National Statistics Street Count undertaken by the Government stated that only one person in Warrington was homeless, and only four in Birmingham and only nine in London!

From late May volunteers met outside the famous Warrington Town Hall's 'golden gates' at 9pm to do three landmark things; firstly to create a nightly register of people who were street homeless, second to provide support and link people to relevant services and third to hand out hot drinks and sandwiches. Over an average month, 40 people were presenting at



Hand over of the lease at the "Room at the Inn" (l-r) Jonathon Rimmer and Rosemary Howden from Cairo Street Chapel; the Rev Steven Parish, Holy Trinity Church; Ken McDermott Friars Green Chapel; Sue Blyth, YMCA; the Rev Lynne Readett, Cairo Street Chapel; Councillor Roy Smith and Kelly Claffey of Warrington Supporting People.

the gates, and most evenings there were at least 10 people who had nowhere to go. Sue said the volunteers met through rain, hail and fine evenings from May to the snowy evening of the 1st of December when the new shelter opened. Demonstrating that the official government figures were wrong!

Sue wanted to be involved because while working in the YMCA, she could see the problems first-hand; seeing for herself people huddled under blankets and duvets at the back of buildings, with no direction in life and no dignity. She is a strong believer in social justice and she felt she could find a way to offer a better quality of life to restore personal respect to these people. She also believes Warrington, as a town, has real responsibilities for all its residents – homeless or not. Sue was amazed by the response from local people, people from all walks of life who wanted to step forward and help, some who had been homeless themselves and were now in a better position wanted to offer advice and guidance, people from churches and chapels, ordinary members of the public who wanted to put something back into the community.

The shelter has been opened at the Patten Hall, which was coincidentally, long ago, named after a worshipper at the Cairo Street Chapel, Lady Mary Patten. It has been a long and a hard struggle with months of hard work for the volunteers and the YMCA staff who stood outside the gates each evening, the steering group, of which I am a member, have met on a regular basis, usually before 9am in order to allow people to go to their regular employment afterwards. We have all seen this project through to its conclusion, a place for the homeless in Warrington to have a warm and a safe place to sleep, hot food, friendship and clean socks! Sue Blyth has only praise for the people who have supported the project but it is only with people like Sue that this project could have been made possible.

The project has brought together the town centre clergy and has forged and renewed friendships. It has given dignity to the people who will use the facility; it has brought to the attention of the people of Warrington the very real and pressing problem of homelessness in the town. The congregation of Cairo Street Chapel have seen that their works of faith have been brought to a conclusion with acts of good deeds and Sue Blyth from the YMCA has been reunited with Unitarianism after some 15 years. She had been a member of Leigh congregation before it closed down.

The Rev Lynne Readett is minister to Cairo Street, Warrington and Park Lane and Ashton-in-Makerfield congregations.



The churchyard where homeless people slept.

Convenor and Chief officer

Derek McAuley, Chief Officer of the General Assembly

Inquirer: Where does the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches stand in 2011?

I have been Chief Officer for over a year so I think I can now gain some perspective as an insider working full-time for the movement. The General Assembly is fundamentally about its congregations not the central institution. I sit at the centre of a web of often historic charities that can offer so much to our movement. I see growth in many of our congregations; stability in another large group but unfortunately a third group who are in a really difficult situation and who may not survive the present generation. I can point to congregations that have gone from small numbers to a more sustainable group. This does mean welcoming new people and their new ways of doing things, accepting change and new leadership. My knowledge of Unitarian history urges us to take the 'long view' – we have been through difficult times before and have come out of them stronger. I feel we are coming out of the many years of decline and I have a hope for the future.

Inq: What challenges lie ahead for the movement?

There are challenges but within them are often the seeds of opportunity. We are facing the continuing tidal wave of secularism with, ironically, a growing polarity between fundamentalism and militant atheism. As a liberal religious body we can sometimes be ignored, but this offers an opportunity to present an alternative more in line with the views of many people in Britain. In recent weeks I have met at least two people whose answer to the question 'Do you know about the Unitarians?' was 'You're like the Methodists' which came as a bit of a shock to me. We are so not! But to the outsider we often look the same. So we face the challenge of visibility and clarity in presenting our unique claims as an inclusive and non-creedal faith. Nurturing that internal diversity – theological, geographical, social, political – along with being inclusive, will always be a challenge. There is the problem of trying to sustain an organisational structure created for a much bigger denomination and we can certainly simplify things and make sure our resources – funding, people, expertise – are focused on the frontline. The Annual Meetings in 2011 will celebrate our volunteers who are the cornerstone of our movement and the key to its future.

Inq: What challenges are ahead for the Executive Committee?

The Executive Committee has clearly set out its strategic priorities and objectives for the next five years. We consulted the denomination in the 'Difficult Choices' debate and had to make some tough decisions. We will be developing professional ministry as well as effective lay leadership, seek to achieve greater visibility and improve the services offered to congregations.

The priorities are now being taken forward in specific actions and we must ensure that these have the impact we desire. One challenge for the Executive Committee is to remain focused on these key priorities and not be distracted. I know some people are disappointed that things they support – though undoubtedly valuable – are not in the priority list. But it is an old saying 'To govern is to choose'.



Numbers decline, find enough candidates for election. What is the

Finances remain a constant concern. We have had to draw from reserves in recent years to sustain activity and are doing so again this year. This cannot go on. We have the benefit of Bowland Trust matching for all 'live giving' and we need to be exploiting its tremendous generosity to the limit.

Inq: How

do you think the new form of governance of the General Assembly is working?

I don't see it as 'new' any more. Having a trustee group of a manageable size that meet as a decision-making body rather than some form of 'parliament' provides a clarity to me as Chief Officer about ultimate accountability. At times the Executive Committee has been too operational. But with the focus on strategic priorities, it is now developing in its governance role. We still need to work on issues of clarity of responsibilities between the Executive Committee, the Commissions and Panels and the small staff team.

Inq: The election in autumn did not require a ballot because too few candidates put their names forward and left an empty seat on the Executive Committee. In your opinion, why didn't enough candidates come forward to serve on the EC?

The responsibilities of the Executive Committee are so unlike any other part of our movement. It is a medium-sized organisation which employs staff with a very wide remit. Sometimes there are difficult decisions to be made. As our community has grown smaller, the number of people able and willing to take on such an onerous role is relatively few. There are also practical problems with the time commitment for those in work; not only for the EC meetings but also the links roles with Districts and Commissions. Many of our key volunteers are also already committed to the numerous Unitarian bodies that exist and which they enjoy supporting.

Inq: Do you think the governing structure should be changed in order to encourage more – and more diverse – participation in the EC? Or do you think the shortage of potential leaders is an anomaly?

The model we have is essentially the one that most charities are encouraged to have. There has been a distinct move from large representative bodies to a smaller core group of trustees. The EC has been moving towards a more strategic role which I hope will lessen the time demands and mean more people might be able to serve. This probably means doing less and not trying to pretend we can provide the services that the bigger denominations have but to have more impact with what we actually decide to do. There are ways of encouraging greater participation in the EC's work, building upon the 'Difficult Choices' consultation and to work with Districts more in joint working.

Inq: Has this pattern carried through to commissions and panels, or have there been enough volunteers for those positions?

The Triennial recruitment exercise in mid-2010 did produce

(Continued on page 8)

r assess the movement

**s shrink and not
forward for the last
from the top?**

**Martin Whitell,
Convenor of
the Executive
Committee**

Martin was appointed Convenor of the General Assembly's Executive Committee when Sir Peter Soulsby stepped down in November. Martin is finishing out the term until May. By way of introduction, this is some of what he had to say in his nominating statement when running for election: 'Since April I have been a co-opted member of the EC and have attempted to bring my experience as a former Board member of the John Lewis Partnership and as a working Unitarian Minister to the EC table.

For over 12 years I have been passionate about our movement and still am. I would value the opportunity to carry the Executive Committee work and vision, in which I have had a share, further forward for the best interests of Unitarianism in these Islands.'

Inquirer: Where does the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches stand in 2011?

It is an important launching point in its recent history and with exciting prospects and proposals for its future. The spirit of many congregations is positive and there are signs of growth which are well founded in fresh views of what Unitarians are and what a great religious perspective we offer. The Executive Committee has regrouped with a robust commitment to delivering relevant, requested and affordable structures and programmes for our future.

Inq: What challenges lie ahead for the movement?

Any vibrant body will face challenges. I see three:

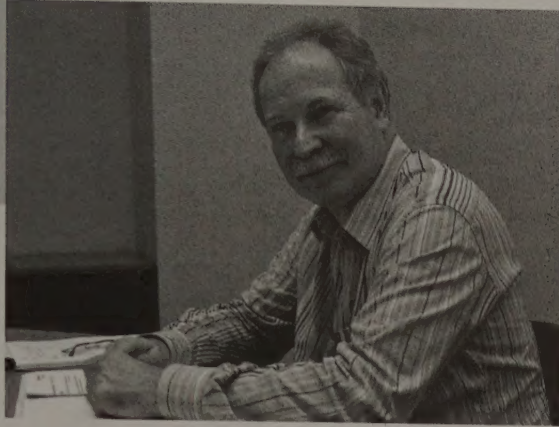
- We are still one of the best-kept faith secrets. Becoming visible, attractive and welcoming must be a key objective
- Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. Our convictions are held passionately, but these need to be kept in balance with our genuine respect and love for each other as people.
- Few of our congregations or associated bodies are watertight from the current financial battering that most organisations face. Being as committed to live giving as our forefathers were is important to preserve our presence and future effectiveness.

Inq: What challenges are ahead for the Executive Committee?

The Executive Committee has embarked on an adventurous implementation of the views gathered from our congregations and members in the 'Difficult Choices' exercise. Putting the four strategic objectives in place, enthusing Unitarians throughout the UK with the process and delivering visible results is the big challenge for the coming year.

Inq: How do you think the new form of governance of the General Assembly is working?

One of the most common misunderstandings about governance is that it is something that is sorted once and for all. I don't think many



people have quite appreciated the journey we have travelled since the Task Force delivered the new structures which are now in place. Some aspects have worked smoothly; others have taken more adjustment and frankly some stalled and needed to be re-launched.

One of the signs that the governance is working is that it is still committed to improving its effectiveness across the board along with its reputation within our movement. I may be biased but I think the new governance has earned its wings and we will see some impressive and honourable

output in the next few months.

Inq: The election in autumn did not require a ballot because too few candidates put their names forward and left an empty seat on the Executive Committee. In your opinion, why didn't enough candidates come forward to serve on the EC?

The Electoral Panel received useful feedback and some of it hurt. Sometimes no pain, no gain. Bad press can be difficult to overcome. I think that already people who hesitated in October and November are seeing that the gears aren't crashing so much and the EC is a place where progress and teamwork are being delivered.

Inq: Do you think the governing structure should be changed in order to encourage more – and more diverse – participation in the EC? Or do you think the shortage of potential leaders is an anomaly?

I think it is too early to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The previous members of the EC have done very good work and there have been notable achievements. Some of our best leaders were in it at the beginning. The most recent news I am hearing is that there are people with great leadership ability and experience who want to be in the EC gang!

Inq: Has this pattern carried through to commissions and panels, or have there been enough volunteers for those positions?

Some Commissions are over-subscribed and others are managing with about the right number. Most people who have looked at the strategic priorities realise that we need to refresh our approach to Commissions and Panels. We need to celebrate what we have achieved and open our doors to new and existing volunteers for the future formats.

Inq: How does the EC plan to proceed in light of being short-handed?

Derek answered on the process (see previous page), but the EC is not floored by having a potential vacancy. We will invite people who feel they have the skills, energy and commitment to apply for the remaining position and following a slight constitutional amendment at the Annual Meetings we hope to co-opt a member until the next election process.

Inq: What are you most looking forward to doing within the movement in 2011?

Continuing to work locally and nationally at making our unique and compelling faith become something which works efficiently and which starts to influence the communities where we live. Not just numerical congregational growth, but actually 'doing the right thing' not just knowing 'the right thing to do'.

The Rev Martin Whitell is minister at John Pounds Memorial Church, Portsmouth.

Dublin commits to new minister

Following the retirement of our much loved minister the Rev Bill Darlison, the Rev Bridget Spain was officially invited to succeed him in a special ceremony held as part of the Harvest Thanksgiving Service. This followed acceptance by our members at the AGM held on 25 April of the details of an agreement, drawn up by our managing committee, in conjunction with the Rev Spain, and which contained a clause setting out that she would assume full responsibility for providing ministry from 10 June until 29 February 2012 while assisting in the search for an acceptable candidate to succeed her.

In the resolution, framed within the Presbytery of Munster being part of the Non-subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland and accepted by the members of Dublin Unitarian Church, the Rev Bridget Spain accepted the roles of leading worship, speaking the truth in love and caring for our people while guided by the teaching of Jesus. She also agreed to use her ministerial skills and knowledge so as to provide guidance to those in the church who might wish to grow and develop as pastors to this and other communities. Bridget accepted the role of acting as mediator in any differences which might arise within the community in a spirit of trust, love and understanding.

For its part the congregation pledged their support in honouring the terms and conditions of the contract and in Bridget's work as their spiritual leader.

At the conclusion of the Mutual Commitment a pledge was given by both parties to honour the legacy and memory of those who have gone before us, to keep our church open to



those in sympathy with our principles of Freedom, Reason and Tolerance who wish to join us on our spiritual journey and to attempt to pass on to our successors the inheritance of a community that contains all that was best in us.

— Charlie McCaw

Derek: 'We have a mighty work to do'

(Continued from page 6)

enough volunteers for each group and we continue to fill vacancies that arise on a rolling basis. It is clear to me that there is great talent out in the denomination, and we didn't necessarily reach new people, so we must be more creative in advertising and seeking them out. We seem to have achieved this with the forthcoming facilitation and support training weekend with lots of new people coming.

I am also concerned that as a result of falling ministerial numbers we may not be getting the theological input to our Commissions and Panels that we require. We are, after all, a faith community and our ministers have specialist knowledge to contribute.

Inq: How does the EC plan to proceed in light of being short-handed?

The EC has proposed that they co-opt to the vacant position and has put forward a Constitutional Amendment to ensure they have the explicit power to do so. They will seek volunteers as they did previously when there was a vacancy to have someone in place ready to start in May – subject to the Constitutional change being approved.

Inq: What are you most looking forward to doing within the movement in 2011?

As I told the East Midlands Unitarians gathering at Kingswood, 'We have a mighty work to do'. I truly believe this. We make a real difference to the peoples' lives and to local communities. In the year ahead I am keen to get out into districts more. I also want Unitarian Headquarters to showcase what is going on in our congregations. The internet is a great opportunity to do this – although there is information overload, so getting greater visibility will be a challenge.

I will also be continuing to push the Government to provide

the necessary regulations that will allow civil partnerships to be performed in our premises following the passing of the Equality Act last year. With a new Recording Clerk taking up post at the Quakers in Britain, I am looking forward to working with him on areas of shared interest.

Derek McAuley is chief officer of the General Assembly.

Gaskell exhibition travels to Manchester



Following the success of the Elizabeth Gaskell weekend in York last September, Anne Hutchison's work 'Molly Gibson's Sketchbook' is now on display at Manchester's John Rylands Library, home of Elizabeth Gaskell's letters and manuscripts.

A series of drawings and collages based upon 'Wives and Daughters', Anne's work is subtitled 'A Victorian Life in Pictures'. It will be on exhibition in the library until the end of March. The library is home to the original manuscript of Gaskell's last novel, which was never finished. Anne Hutchison has added two new pieces to her exhibition to honour the occasion. (Above: Detail of one of the new works)

For more information see: www.annehutchisonart.com

The Fall -- a meditation

Madeline A Stringer, a member of the Dublin congregation, was inspired to submit this meditation following Stephen Hawking's pronouncements on the creation.

It was just a feeling, a scratching at what could have been a mind. Just like an almost-remembered word on the tip of the tongue; and a searching, through nothing, for there was nothing to search through, nor any concept of a search. But yet it scratched.

Insistent, an irritation at the edge of consciousness.

Small, but with a memory of huge.

And then, from the back of what might have been a brain, had there been brains:

I REMEMBER!

And it flooded forth, ideas as energy, as patterns, as matter, and filled a space, a space that a moment before had not been a space, when there had been no moments. Energy and matter whirled, and fled, and coalesced, and revolved, and the excitement of it all made heat, and light, and she hugged herself and danced with it, and spread herself wide, and sang.

And now that there was time, she spent it watching, and listening, and enjoying. She saw the energies fold into themselves and have shapes, and when she came near, they awoke, and she sang with them, and wrapped herself around them, and they gloried together in the wonder of being.

She watched as stars cooled, and planets formed, and rains came, and laughed at it all.

Her energy blended through it, and the consciousnesses knew her and moved with her. She travelled in a moment from the edge of what was, to the other, and loved all of it, and it all, unthinking, loved her.

And at last, a part of her found a little planet she had not seen before, had missed in the aeons of dancing with the energies who knew her, and she swooped down to enjoy this new place. She was puzzled, she found solid creatures, with edges, each one separate from the others. "Did these come from me?" she wondered, and then "They must have, for there was nothing before I remembered."

So she looked, and studied, and watched. But these creatures did not dance their energies with her, did not hum with the ecstasy of being. They communicated slowly, so she studied more, and learnt to understand this new way.

Then she heard them, and they were saying: "Our god, you are most wonderful", "Oh, Lord, protect us", "We bow before you", "You are the most high". And he heard, and was impressed, and preened himself. He found a place on which to sit, where he could hear the praises, and give commands in return. And the people and their god, which they had made in their own image, forgot her.

But the greater part of her, which stayed away from that tiny planet, watched her Fall with sadness, and waited to reawaken.

©Madeline Ann Stringer

Photo of Sagittarius Quintuplet Cluster photographed by Hubble – NASA

Letters to the Editor

Explore your faith online

To the Editor:

As James Berry remarks in his *Inquirer* article (11 Dec 2010) 'The web is the first place where people look for answers to their spiritual questions.' I would like to draw the attention of readers to the Unitarian Internet Fellowship (UIF) at: <http://www.nufonline.org.uk/NewNUF09/index.php> which provides an online discussion space open to *all* Unitarians (not just NUF members), where these 'spiritual questions' can be explored and shared.

There is a simple registration process,

which once completed, will allow you to participate in a variety of discussion threads, as well as read book reviews, poetry, prayers and reflections from other contributors. You may already be registered but have not 'looked in' for some time or you may have overlooked this part of the Unitarian 'landscape'.

Although we explore some serious topics, we also attend to the lighter side of life (such as 'Strictly Come Dancing'!) in a general 'chat' thread.

We would be pleased to welcome both new and 'lapsed' members to invigorate our discussions.

Kenneth Smith

Moderator of the UIF

Fleet

Christmas issue was a gift

To the Editor and all the people who wrote in the 'Happy Christmas' edition of *The Inquirer*:

Reading it was like being on a roller-coaster of emotions. One minute I was nodding my head in affirmation, laughing, smiling and when it came to the 'True story of a little Christmas 'alien'' by Colin Morgan, I was very moved.

Thank you.

Carol Chilton

Octagon Unitarian Chapel
Norwich

Register land and safeguard the future

You know that you own your church and its land but how easily can you prove it?

Land Registration forms the cornerstone of a stable, modern system, providing everyone with the confidence they need when dealing with property.

Land Registry, a government department, holds the world's largest property database, guaranteeing ownership of £1,300 billion worth of property. However, until recently, land was only registered only when it was sold or mortgaged, so land held by churches, rarely enjoys the protection offered by registration.

What are the benefits of voluntary registration?

- Protect your land

Registration provides the best legal protection available for land. There is a danger that encroachment from neighbouring properties or claims for adverse possession, can lead to landowners losing legal ownership to part of their unregistered land. The Land Registration Act 2002 gives much greater protection where land is registered.

- Simplify your procedures

Registration also allows you to improve your estate management procedures. Old deeds are no longer needed to confirm your title as this information is provided by the easy-to-read format of the electronic register. Paper copies of the register and title plan are issued on first registration and any updates can be easily viewed easily on the internet. However, some information in the old deeds is not entered on the register, for example, agreements with third parties, such as personal covenants. So, the old deed should still be retained for records purposes.

- Lost deeds

Even where deeds have been lost, (which can happen when land has been in the same ownership for a long time) or where there are other difficulties when proving title to land, Land Registry will accept voluntary applications if satisfactory alternative evidence is provided.

- Peace of mind

Registering the land offers peace of mind for landowners or

charity trustees as it provides an easy way of proving ownership. It also means that future transactions, such as sales, the granting of leases, or mortgages are made much easier. Delays that could have arisen while the landowner proved title are eliminated and transactions are often easier to bring to a successful conclusion.

- What does it cost?

Land Registry currently offers a discounted fee for voluntary applications. The fee for first registration is reduced by up to 25%, so this represents a significant saving compared to a possible compulsory registration at a later date. The fee is usually based on the value of the land and ranges from a minimum of £40 up to a maximum of £690. Where a number of different sites in the same ownership are involved these can be treated as one application if they are lodged together, so the maximum fee remains the same.

- What should I do next?

Lodging a voluntary first registration can be relatively straightforward and further information about the process is available by accessing: <http://www.landregistry.gov.uk/> and click on 'Register your land'.

There is no need to contact Land Registry before making an application for voluntary registration. However, should you wish to do so for any reason, please contact Martyn Davies the Register Development Manager at the Land Registry Peterborough Office on 01733 288319 or email martyn.davies@landregistry.gsi.gov.uk

Derek McAuley, Unitarian Chief Officer, said "The General Assembly is pleased to give its full support for this initiative by the Land Registry. I would hope that all congregations would register the ownership of their property. We have come across instances where Unitarian property has been lost because ownership was uncertain or others had sought to misappropriate Unitarian assets. Good governance means taking very practical steps such as this. It does incur a cost now but the benefits will come to future generations of trustees. Unitarian Headquarters will be pleased to assist if we can in the provision of any historic documents in our possession that are required."

The trees bore witness to the carnage

This week's Holocaust Memorial Day and **Adrian Clarke's** account of his trip to Birkenau remind us to 'Never Forget'.

'The trees bore witness' was just one of the many thoughts that flashed in my head as I stood on the grass in Birkenau next to the remains of one of the gas chambers that the Nazis had tried to destroy before the liberation of the camp. Surrounded by trees, a symbol of life, I felt the need to touch one, to somehow try and connect with those who suffered such a terrible fate in this place. Not the first thing I had found myself touching that day, nor the last, but for me this somehow seemed so much more powerful, more real.

Outside of those tree lines and beyond lines of barbed wire, a symbol of oppression but no more than in this place of eerie silence lay the free countryside of Poland where so many must have had their last final glimpse of freedom and of life.

This was late in the day of our visit and so much had already gone through my thoughts and the feeling of emptiness and absolute bewilderment overcame me.

We had arrived at Auschwitz that morning and I had felt nervous and sick, not knowing what to expect and still having my own internal battle of whether I had made the right decision to come and experience the next few hours.

We passed through the gates the words, 'Work makes free' inscribed above our heads and we trod the same steps as others had done in very different circumstances and my nervousness grew.

As our guide showed us round it was hard to try to understand the sheer horror or scale of what had taken place there and during the day the words 'barbaric', 'brutal', 'medieval' flashed through my thoughts, coupled with emotions of anger, sadness, hate combined with strange thoughts of the sheer efficiency of the camps as a method of disposal. Because that is truly what they were, where they took already broken people who marched in lines to their ends with an acceptance that this was the end.

I found myself over and over again thinking of the word incomprehensible



Beds at Birkenau. Photo by Leonce Benutzer

because that is what it was to me, but also to hear tales of compassion shown between prisoners gave me hope. And I cling to the thought that as brutal as the SS were, I need to believe that in at least some there was – if nothing more – the odd thought of compassion. Because if I cannot hang on to that, then trying to understand this gets impossible.

Through the blocks, their walls lined with the photographs of the faces of those murdered you get to the end of a corridor and have to remind yourself they were individuals as a picture of 'a face' sticks in your mind and the eyes tell the story of the persecution and you go back and look again to remind yourself of them as people, each in their own right and to pay respect to their sacrifice and suffering and to remember them.

Their heads shaved in prison uniform in an attempt to de-humanise them but the stories of the camp told these many years on is testimony to the ability of the human spirit to remain.

Everywhere you look is a sight of suffering, of unimaginable pain and what we must remember is that everyone was murdered – not killed. Armies on the battlefield kill one another, these innocents were murdered, many just because of their origin of birth the only crime they are deemed to have committed.

In Birkenau, I think of the families and especially the children. During their short time there, was there ever a mo-

ment when childish thoughts filled their young heads. Again, I have to hope that happened to try to help me deal with what I have experienced. Those thoughts hit me one morning when I went upstairs to get Georgia, my 12-year-old out of her bed, to moan at her that she's going to be late. But not that morning, because Georgia is in her world and has a right to be there, where time isn't an issue, where childish thoughts can fill her young mind and where a life time of worries lie ahead of her but not today, not just now.

I have touched the walls that others have clawed at and looked through the doors and windows that they looked through but what I have seen is nothing compared to what they must have seen.

Would I go again? At this moment in time, the answer is 'no'.

If you ask me if you should go to a camp, I would tell you to think carefully. This is not a visit to war graves or to the historic site of a battle. For some it is a pilgrimage and rightfully so, for others a need to try and make sense of what went on. But for me, I will voice every time I hear those who deny that this took place that I, along with the trees, have borne witness to it. Truly a hell on earth and we should never forget.

Adrian Clarke is a Falklands War veteran living in Cambridge.

Bury St Edmunds launches 300th celebrations



(l-r) Brenda Fiske, Bury trustee; Martin Gienke, lay person in charge; Cllr Ian Houlder, mayor of St Edmundsbury; and Richard Hegerty, chair of the congregation.

The 300th Celebrations of the Unitarian Meeting House in Bury St Edmunds were officially launched on in January by the Mayor of St Edmundsbury. Cllr Ian Houlder described the building as "a great asset to the town." The Events Guide for the year was unveiled and a souvenir history booklet by Frank Walker is soon to be published. Amongst the 45 events scheduled for the year are five historical talks by local scholars and our own Alan Ruston. Sixteen concerts by local groups and other professional such as Prime Brass and the Brook Street Band are planned.

A week-long exhibition plus two drop-in days for youngsters have been organised at the local museum, Moyse's Hall. Young people from a local primary school will prepare a time capsule to be placed in the meeting house and older children from the Bury area will take part in a Heritage Lottery Funded 'Young Roots' project. This is in partnership with the Theatre Royal. They will hunt for human stories around the time of the construction in 1711 and then hand over their discoveries to a professional playwright who will create a show which will be performed by youngsters in the Bury Unitarian Meeting House and others Unitarian venues in East Anglia.

The local cinema has become involved with a special showing of 'Tom Jones'. Special services have been arranged to celebrate the people who constructed and restored the building along with services for Evolution Sunday and for the 500th anniversary of

Michael Servetus. It all ends with a New Year's Eve party.

— Martin Gienke

Global Chalice Lighting

The International Council of Unitarians and Universalists announces the 90th in its monthly series of global chalice lighting readings. Each congregation is asked to use the reading for one worship service in the designated month, identifying it as the 'Global Chalice Lighting' for that month. This Global Chalice Lighting is to be used during February 2011.

To celebrate our gathering together this morning we light our chalice

as we do each time we meet for worship.

It is good to embrace this familiar ritual.

It is good to know that through this action we are united with Unitarian and Universalist sisters and brothers throughout the world.

But let us try to ensure that our understanding of this familiar and comforting ritual does not become dulled through repetition.

The symbol of a flaming chalice stood initially for a life of service.

Its designer had never seen a Unitarian church or heard a sermon.

What he had seen was faith in action in the form of the Unitarian Service Committee.

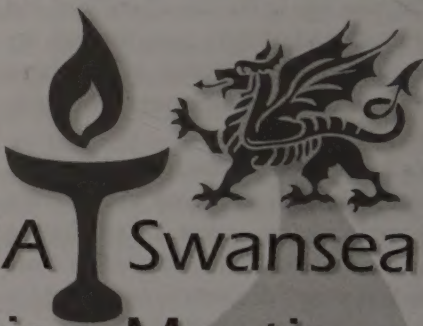
As we reflect upon our flaming chalice let us remember this commitment to service – which comes in many forms.

But let us also remember that the flaming chalice, like our faith, stands open to receive new truths that pass the tests of reason, justice, and compassion.

Let us take a moment to call to mind what special meaning this symbol of fire, of light and of warmth might have for each of us this morning, and for our lives in the week ahead.

— The Rev Maud Robinson
Scottish Unitarian Association

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